

CHAPTER TWO

"Climb Mount Niitaka"— The Attack on Pearl Harbor

On Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, all but three of the huge warships of the U.S. Pacific fleet lay anchored in Pearl Harbor on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. The USS *Arizona*, *West Virginia*, *Oklahoma*, *California*, *Maryland*, and many other heavily armored vessels, along with smaller cruisers and destroyers, lined the docks of the harbor. Missing that fateful morning were the *Colorado*, in dry dock on the U.S. West Coast, and the aircraft carriers *Lexington* and *Enterprise*, which were at sea. Rows of military barracks, administrative and maintenance buildings, as well as civilian houses stretched along the coast to the harbor. Nearly four hundred American bombers and fighter planes were parked, wingtip to wingtip, on nearby airfields.

Unprepared for Trouble

By 7:00 A.M., some American personnel at the Pearl Harbor base were already eating breakfast or getting ready for church. But most were still asleep or lounging in their bunks. The general mood was calm because no one had any reason to suspect trouble. Everyone knew that American-Japanese relations had been strained since the Japanese invasion of Indochina the previous July. But Japan was thousands of miles away, and the Americans at Pearl Harbor assumed there would be weeks of advance notice if Hawaii were to be threatened.

At precisely 7:02, an Army Air Corps radar operator detected a large group of planes approaching Oahu from the north at a distance of about 137 miles. The operator quickly telephoned his



The Japanese Attack Planes

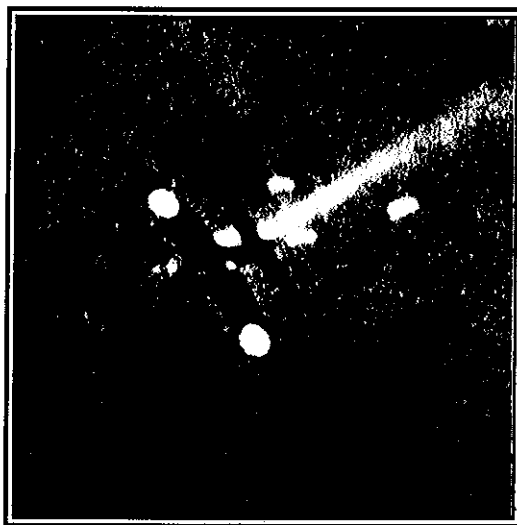
During the 1920s and 1930s, the Japanese built one of the most modern and effective air forces in the world. U.S. aviation experts knew that the Japanese were building large numbers of planes. But the Americans greatly underestimated the worth of Japanese attack planes. U.S. officials thought the Japanese planes were poor copies of American planes. Said a U.S. military expert in 1938, "The [Japanese] ability to produce original [aircraft] designs is lacking." When the war began, the Americans were stunned by the superiority of Japanese warplanes.

Of the many types of fighter aircraft the Japanese designed, the world famous Zero was the most formidable. The Zero, which first saw service in 1940, was the first carrier-based fighter plane that could perform as well as land-based planes. It could fly at 330 mph, making it the fastest attack plane in the world when it was built. With its speed, superior firepower, and an

ability to climb quickly and maneuver easily, the Zero was much more effective than any of the American planes during the early days of the war. Its one weakness was that it was constructed of lightweight materials and had no armor. This meant that even a minor hit could destroy it. Although American planes eventually surpassed it in speed and firepower, for at least two years, the Zero was the terror of the Pacific skies.

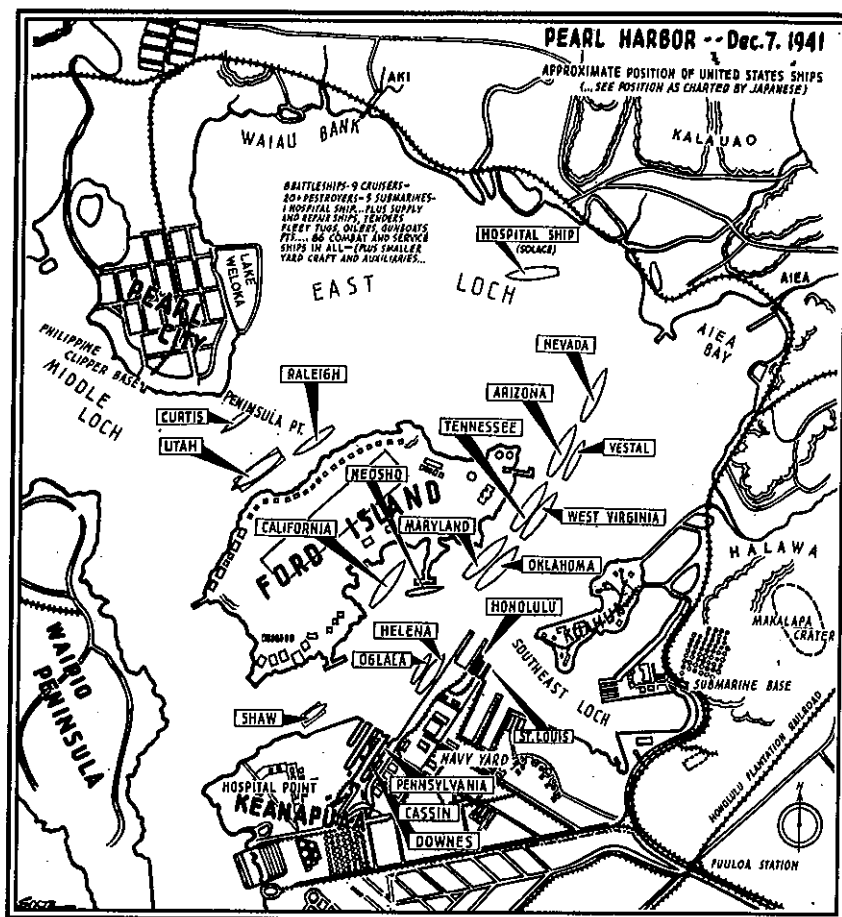
Other effective Japanese attack planes were the AICHI Type 99 Carrier Bomber, nicknamed the "Val" by the Allies, and the B5N2 Type 97 Carrier Bomber, nicknamed the "Kate." The Val flew at 240 mph, much slower than the Zero, but maneuvered unusually well. Vals sank more Allied warships than any other Axis planes during World War II. The Kates were deadly torpedo planes, each of which could carry a 1,764-pound torpedo. When one of these powerful bombs struck an Allied ship in the right place, the vessel was doomed.

The Japanese Zero fighter plane was a feared component of Japan's air force.



Minoru Genda— Master of Air Attack

When the Japanese admirals began to plot the attack on Pearl Harbor, they put Minoru Genda in charge of the planning. A thirty-six-year-old aviation expert, Genda had formerly served in the Japanese embassy in London. There, he carefully studied Great Britain's successful use of air power. Genda told the admirals that the Pearl Harbor plan, code-named Operation Z, was risky but still possible. He worked out the details with Mitsuo Fuchida, who actually led the attack. Later, Fuchida commented, "Genda wrote the script. My pilots and I produced it." Genda was able to coordinate a major air strike while maintaining complete radio silence. He remembered seeing a newsreel which showed four U.S. carriers moving together in close formation. The Americans signaled to each other using flags and spotlights. The Japanese, concluded Genda, could use these same tactics while launching planes against Pearl Harbor. In 1942, Genda planned the Japanese strategy for the Battle of Midway. He served his country again after the war as the head of the air force defense system from 1959 to 1962.



This map shows the approximate position of the United States' naval fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the day Japanese pilots made a surprise attack there.

duty officer, Lt. Kermit Tyler. Tyler knew that a flight of American B-17 bombers had left California on December 6 and were due to arrive that morning on Oahu. Thinking that these were the planes that had been sighted, he told the radar man, "Don't worry about it."

What Tyler and his coworkers had no way of knowing was that the approaching planes were actually Japanese. The fighters had come to fulfill a top secret mission that Tojo and Japan's senior naval officers had planned in September. The pilots had been briefed on October 5 and had sailed, along with their planes, on the warships of Admiral Nagumo's mighty fleet. On December 5, at a secret rendezvous point in the Pacific Ocean north of Hawaii, the fleet received the coded radio message "Climb Mount Niitaka." This was the order to proceed with the surprise attack on the American base. Early in the morning of December 7, the Japanese planes lifted off their carriers and headed for Pearl Harbor.

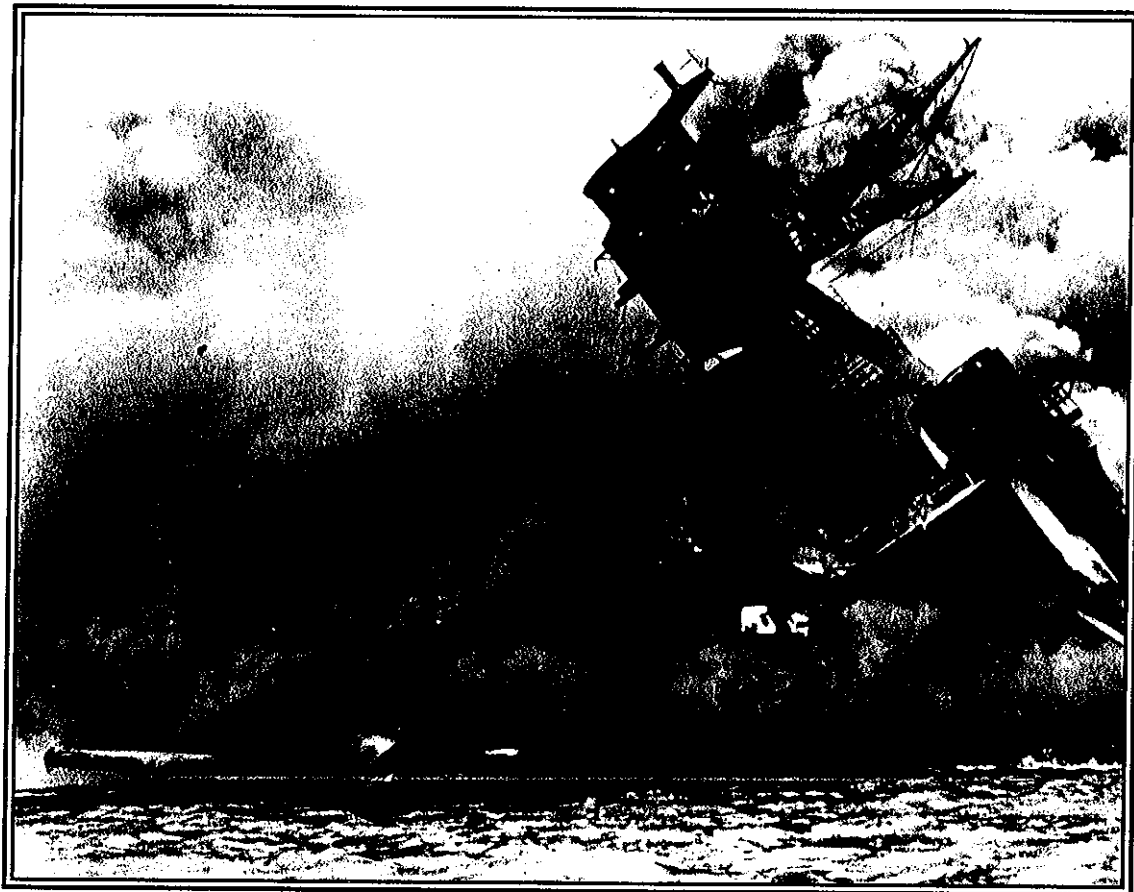


The Sinking of the *Arizona*

On the morning of December 7, 1941, the great battleship USS *Arizona* floated beside its sister ships of the Pacific fleet in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Ensign G.S. Flannigan remembered how an air raid siren suddenly broke the morning calm. "I was in the bunk room," recalled Flannigan, "and everyone thought it was a joke to have an air raid on Sunday. Then I heard an explosion." Within minutes, dozens of Japanese planes homed in on the *Arizona* and released a deadly rain of bombs and torpedoes. One bomb fell directly into one of the vessel's funnels. Seconds later,

the ship's "forward magazines blew up with a tremendous explosion and large sheets of flame shot skyward," according to one eyewitness. Burning debris from this blast landed on the nearby USS *Tennessee*, and ignited raging fires. More than twelve hundred of the *Arizona*'s crew, including Adm. Isaac C. Kidd, died in the attack. The ship went down, forever entombing many of the victims at the bottom of the harbor. After the war, a monument was erected atop the *Arizona*'s sunken bridge in honor of those who lost their lives.

Japanese bombs and torpedoes destroyed the USS Arizona, killing more than twelve hundred crewmen.



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Mitsuo Fuchida, commander and leader of the attackers, flew ahead of the other planes to scout the target. He arrived high over Oahu at 7:53 A.M. and saw the American ships lined up like sitting ducks below. Excitedly, he radioed back to the other planes, "Tora! Tora! Tora!" (Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!), which signified the successful achievement of complete surprise.

A Wave of Destruction

At 8:10 A.M., a huge squadron of 189 Japanese planes swarmed like angry hornets over Oahu's volcano, Diamond Head, and swooped down on the unsuspecting Americans. Torpedo planes and dive-bombers began raining explosives on the warships in the harbor, while fighter planes attacked the airfields. Startled American sailors, marines, and other personnel scrambled to mount a defense, but they were hindered by deafening noise, smoke, flames, and mass confusion. The Japanese attackers roamed at will, blowing up barracks, hangars, and houses as well as ships and planes. They spread a wave of destruction as they went.

American admiral Husband E. Kimmel was in his home on a hill overlooking the harbor when he received the message, "The Japanese are attacking Pearl Harbor, and this is no drill!" Kimmel ran into his garden and watched helplessly as, one by one, the American warships were struck by bombs. The *Arizona* took a hit in its forward section and burst into flames. Like sharks sensing spilled blood, more Japanese fighters closed in and rained a barrage of bombs on the ship. As it sunk, more than twelve hundred of its crew of fifteen hundred died in the explosions and fires or drowned.

Massive explosions repeatedly rocked the other ships. U.S. commander Jesse Kenworth, serving aboard the *West Virginia*, recalled:

As I reached the upper deck, I felt a very heavy shock and heard a loud explosion and the ship immediately began to list to port. Oil and water descended on the deck and by the time I had reached the boat deck, the shock of two more explosions on the port side was felt. As I attempted to get to the Conning Tower over decks slippery with oil ... I felt the shock of another heavy explosion.

The *Oklahoma* was hit by three torpedoes and quickly capsized, taking four hundred men to their death. The *California*, *Maryland*, *Tennessee*, and many other ships sustained heavy damage and numerous casualties. Many sailors jumped from their sinking ships in desperation, only to be burned to death in a mass of blazing oil that covered the surface of the harbor.

Meanwhile, the relentless attackers destroyed nearly all the planes on the airfields, making it impossible for the Americans to

muster a counterattack. The flight of B-17s that Lieutenant Tyler had confused with the enemy planes arrived at the height of the attack, but they carried no ammunition and could do nothing to help. Shot at by Japanese fighter planes, the B-17s barely managed to land on the badly damaged airfields.

The Bodies of the Dead and Dying

At 8:30 A.M., the attackers had spent their ammunition and departed. Fearing that another attack was coming, the American defenders desperately raced to set up anti-aircraft guns and other defenses. Their fears were confirmed when, at 9:00 A.M., a second wave of Japanese planes, consisting of 175 bombers and fighters, appeared and mercilessly resumed the assault. The *Pennsylvania*, *Cassin*, *Downes*, *Shaw*, and several other American ships suffered damage. Some of the attackers flew low and fired at people running along the ground.

When the Japanese finally withdrew at about 10:00 A.M., Mitsuo Fuchida continued to circle overhead, photographing the results of the raid. "A warm feeling came," he later said, "with the realization that the reward [of all the planning and training]...was unfolded before my eyes." He took pictures for nearly an hour, then turned north toward the waiting Japanese fleet.

News of the Japanese attack shocked and outraged most Americans. U.S. citizens nationwide demanded immediate retaliation.



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Fuchida and his pilots left behind a scene of utter devastation. The base at Pearl Harbor lay in ruins. Giant columns of black smoke billowed from the twisted hulks of the crippled ships, and the bodies of dead and dying sailors floated in the water and littered the docks. Eighteen ships were sunk or badly damaged, and 308 planes were destroyed or put out of action. The human toll: 2,343 Americans dead, 1,272 wounded, and almost 1,000 missing. Half of the entire U.S. Navy had been wiped out, and American military power in the Pacific was effectively paralyzed. In stunning contrast, the Japanese lost a mere 29 planes. Their victory was complete and decisive.

Shock and Outrage

When the news of the Pearl Harbor attack reached Japan, the Japanese people celebrated joyously. The *Japan Times and Advertiser* ran the headline: "U.S. Pacific Fleet Is Wiped Out!" The paper went on to describe the triumphant attack and claimed that Japan had "reduced the U.S. to a third-class power overnight." Tojo went on the radio to announce the commencement of war with the United States. Afterward, a Japanese choir sang a patriotic song that included the lines: "Across the sea, corpses in the water, Across the mountain, corpses in the field."

In the United States, there was only shock and outrage. One American newspaper reported, "The U.S. Navy was caught with its pants down." Within hours, demands for retaliation issued from every corner of the country. Montana senator Burton K. Wheeler exclaimed, "The only thing to do now is lick the hell out of them!"

On Sunday afternoon, only hours after the destruction of the American fleet, President Roosevelt met with his military advisers. They received reports that the Japanese had also attacked the Pacific islands of Guam and Wake as well as British bases in Hong Kong, Singapore, and many other areas in Southeast Asia.

The next day, December 8, at 12:30 P.M., Roosevelt stood before a packed joint session of Congress and delivered his war declaration. His words went out over the radio to millions of Americans and listeners in other countries. He said, "Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy, the United States was suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan." Ending his speech with a dramatic call for a massive war effort against Japan, Roosevelt received a thunderous ovation of clapping and cheers. Without a single word of debate, Congress voted nearly unanimously to declare war.

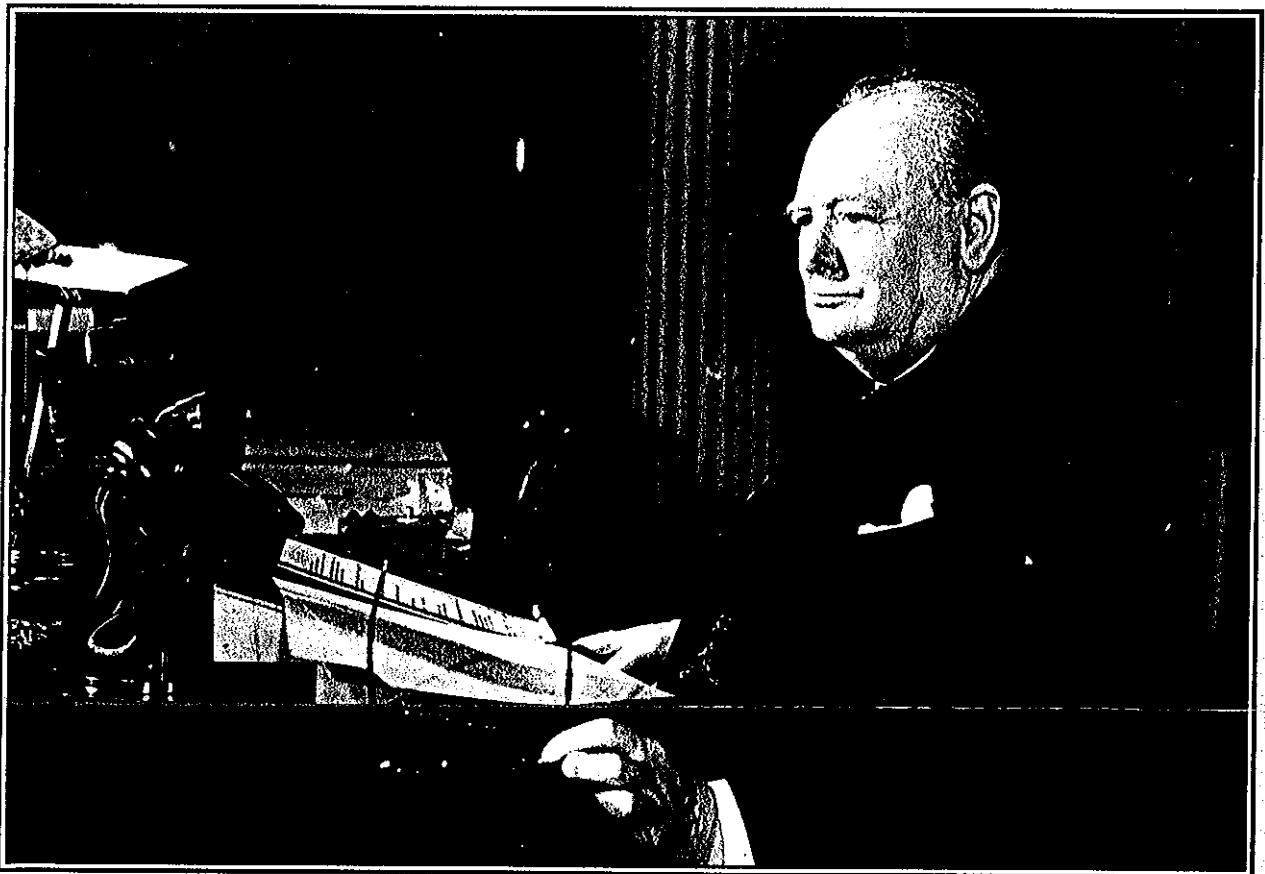
Within hours, all political factions in the country, which usually bickered among themselves, put aside their differences. In a remarkable show of national unity, Americans from all walks of

life angrily opposed the Japanese. Even the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh, a staunch isolationist, lent his support to the war effort, declaring: "Now it has come, and we must meet it as united Americans regardless of our attitude in the past toward the policy our government has followed.... We must now turn every effort to building the greatest and most efficient Army, Navy, and Air Force in the world."

The World Goes to War

As war fever spread across the United States, the country's allies, many of them also victims of the Japanese attacks of December 7, declared war on Japan. Great Britain's prime minister, Winston Churchill, told Parliament: "Now that the issue is joined, it only remains for the two great democracies to face their task with whatever strength God may give them.... We have at least four-fifths of the population of the globe upon our side. We are responsible for their safety and for their future." Joining the United States and Great Britain against Japan were Canada; Australia; New Zealand; the exiled governments of Greece, Yugoslavia, and

British prime minister Winston Churchill also declared war on Japan.



France; and nine Latin American countries. These nations referred to themselves as the Allies. Predictably, the other Axis countries, Germany and Italy, backed Japan and declared war on the Allies.

The world was now engulfed in a state of total war. With such a formidable array of nations lined up against Japan, Tojo and his advisers had little time to assess the implications of their attack on Pearl Harbor. They just assumed that the humiliated Americans would not have the stomach to fight and that the U.S. military threat was eliminated once and for all. This, however, was a grave miscalculation. The Japanese had indeed dealt the United States a crippling blow at Pearl Harbor. But contrary to what the Japanese hoped and believed, the blow was not a fatal one.

And the attackers had made a number of serious mistakes. First, they failed to bomb the naval repair facilities at Pearl Harbor, so all but two of the damaged ships were quickly refloated and repaired. Second, the Japanese failed to find and destroy the carriers *Lexington* and *Enterprise* and their escort ships, which were at sea at the time of the attack. These ships, along with the fighter planes they carried, had the capability of inflicting heavy damage on the Japanese.

The most important mistake made by the Japanese leaders was their failure to realize the consequences of drawing the United States into the war. The Japanese did not take into account the overwhelming industrial might of the United States. Easy access to vast amounts of oil, coal, metals, and other natural resources essential in waging war meant that the United States would have a great advantage. The Japanese also failed to anticipate the tremendous food-producing capabilities of the United States and neglected to consider the unity and resolve of the American people during a national crisis.

While the Japanese underestimated the potential power of the United States, Winston Churchill did not. He had been hoping for the two long years his country had been fighting Germany that the United States would take Great Britain's side in the war. Churchill knew that once committed to the fighting, the United States would prove to be an incredibly powerful and virtually unstoppable force. Sooner or later, he declared, this force would turn the tide in the battle against the Axis nations. Churchill later wrote: "No American will think it wrong of me if I proclaim that to have the United States at our side was to me the greatest joy.... Hitler's fate was sealed... [Italy's] fate was sealed. As for the Japanese, they would be ground to powder. All the rest was merely the proper application of overwhelming force."